

IN BORROWED PLUMES

THE master of the *Sarah Jane* had been missing for two days, and all on board, with the exception of the boy, whom nobody troubled about, were full of joy at the circumstance. Twice before had the skipper, whose habits might, perhaps, be best described as irregular, missed his ship, and word had gone forth that the third time would be the last. His berth was a good one, and the mate wanted it in place of his own, which was wanted by Ted Jones, A.B.

"Two hours more," said the mate anxiously to the men, as they stood leaning against the side, "and I take the ship out."

"Under two hours'll do it," said Ted, peering over the side and watching the water as it slowly rose over the mud. "What's got the old man, I wonder?"

"I don't know, and I don't care," said the mate. "You chaps stand by me and it'll be good for all of us. Mr Pearson said distinct the last time that if the skipper ever missed his ship again it would be his last trip in her, and he told me afore the old man that I wasn't to wait two minutes at any time, but to bring her out right away."

"He's an old fool," said Bill Loch, the other hand; "and nobody'll miss him but the boy, and

he's been looking reg'lar worried all the morning. He looked so worried at dinner time that I give 'im a kick to cheer him up a bit. Look at him now."

The mate gave a supercilious glance in the direction of the boy, and then turned away. The boy, who had no idea of courting observation, stowed himself away behind the windlass; and, taking a letter from his pocket, perused it for the fourth time.

Dear Tommy, [it began] I take my pen in and to inform you that Ime stayin here and cant get away for the reason that I lorst my cloes at cribage larst night, also my money, and everything beside. Dont speak to a living sole about it as the mate wants my birth, but pack up sum cloes and bring them to me without saying nuthing to noboddy. The mates cloths will do becos I haven't got enny other soot, dont tell 'im. You needen't trouble about soks as I've got them left. My hed is so bad I must now conclude. Your affecshunate uncle and captin Joe Bross. P.S. Dont let the mate see you come, or else he wont let you go.

"Two hours more," sighed Tommy, as he put the letter back in his pocket. "How can I get any clothes when they're all locked up? And aunt said I was to look after 'im and see he didn't get into no mischief."

He sat thinking deeply, and then, as the crew of the *Sarah Jane* stepped ashore to take advantage of a glass offered by the mate, he crept down to the cabin again for another desperate look round. The only articles of clothing visible belonged to Mrs Bross, who up to this trip had been sailing

in the schooner to look after its master. At these he gazed hard.

"I'll take 'em and try an' swop 'em for some men's clothes," said he suddenly, snatching the garments from the pegs. "She wouldn't mind"; and hastily rolling them into a parcel, together with a pair of carpet slippers of the captain's, he thrust the lot into an old biscuit bag. Then he shouldered his burden, and, going cautiously on deck, gained the shore, and set off at a trot to the address furnished in the letter.

It was a long way, and the bag was heavy. His first attempt at barter was alarming, for the pawn-broker, who had just been cautioned by the police, was in such a severe and uncomfortable state of morals, that the boy quickly snatched up his bundle again and left. Sorely troubled he walked hastily along, until, in a small bye street, his glance fell upon a baker of mild and benevolent aspect, standing behind the counter of his shop.

"If you please, sir," said Tommy, entering, and depositing his bag on the counter, "have you got any cast-off clothes you don't want?"

The baker turned to a shelf, and selecting a stale loaf cut it in halves, one of which he placed before the boy.

"I don't want bread," said Tommy desperately; "but mother has just died, and father wants mourning for the funeral. He's only got a new suit with him, and if he can change these things of mother's for an old suit, he'd sell his best ones to bury her with."

He shook the articles out on the counter, and the baker's wife, who had just come into the shop, inspected them rather favourably.

"Poor boy, so you've lost your mother," she said, turning the clothes over. "It's a good skirt, Bill."

"Yes, ma'am," said Tommy, dolefully.

"What did she die of?" inquired the baker.

"Scarlet fever," said Tommy, tearfully, mentioning the only disease he knew.

"Scar—— Take them things away," yelled the baker, pushing the clothes on to the floor, and following his wife to the other end of the shop. "Take 'em away directly, you young villain."

His voice was so loud, his manner so imperative, that the startled boy, without stopping to argue, stuffed the clothes pell-mell into the bag again and departed. A farewell glance at the clock made him look almost as horrified as the baker.

"There's no time to be lost," he muttered, as he began to run; "either the old man'll have to come in these or else stay where he is."

He reached the house breathless, and paused before an unshaven man in time-worn greasy clothes, who was smoking a short clay pipe with much enjoyment in front of the door.

"Is Cap'n Bross here?" he panted.

"He's upstairs," said the man, with a leer, "sitting in sackcloth and ashes, more ashes than sackcloth. Have you got some clothes for him?"

"Look here," said Tommy. He was down on his knees with the mouth of the bag open again,

quite in the style of the practised hawker. "Give me an old suit of clothes for them. Hurry up. There's a lovely frock."

"Blimey," said the man, staring. "I've only got these clothes. Wot d'yer take me for? A dook?"

"Well, get me some somewhere," said Tommy. "If you don't the cap'n'll have to come in these, and I'm sure he won't like it."

"I wonder what he'd look like," said the man, with a grin. "Damme if I don't come up and see."

"Get me some clothes," pleaded Tommy.

"I wouldn't get you clothes, no, not for fifty pun," said the man, severely. "Wot d'yer mean wanting to spoil people's pleasure in that way? Come on, come and tell the cap'n what you've got for 'im; I want to 'ear what he ses. He's been swearing 'ard since ten o'clock this morning, but he ought to say something special over this."

He led the way up the bare wooden stairs, followed by the harassed boy, and entered a small dirty room at the top, in the centre of which the master of the *Sarah Jane* sat to deny visitors, in a pair of socks and last week's paper.

"Here's a young gent come to bring you some clothes, cap'n," said the man, taking the sack from the boy.

"Why didn't you come before?" growled the captain, who was reading the advertisements.

The man put his hand in the sack, and pulled out the clothes. "What do you think of 'em?" he asked expectantly.

The captain strove vainly to tell him, but his tongue mercifully forsook its office, and dried between his lips. His brain rang with sentences of scorching iniquity, but they got no further.

"Well, say 'Thank you,' if you can't say nothing else," suggested his tormentor hopefully.

"I couldn't bring nothing else," said Tommy hurriedly; "all the things was locked up. I tried to swop 'em and nearly got locked up for it. Put these on and hurry up."

The captain moistened his lips with his tongue.

"The mate'll get off directly she floats," continued Tommy. "Put these on and spoil his little game. It's raining a little now. Nobody'll see you, and as soon as you git aboard you can borrow some of the men's clothes."

"That's the ticket, cap'n," said the man. "Lord lumme, you'll 'ave everybody falling in love with you."

"Hurry up," said Tommy, dancing with impatience. "Hurry up."

The skipper, dazed and wild-eyed, stood still while his two assistants hastily dressed him, bickering somewhat about details as they did so.

"He ought to be tight-laced, I tell you," said the man.

"He can't be tight-laced without stays," said Tommy scornfully. "You ought to know that."

"Ho, can't he," said the other, discomfited. "You know too much for a young-un. Well, put a bit o' line round 'im then."

"We can't wait for a line," said Tommy, who

was standing on tiptoe to tie the skipper's bonnet on. "Now tie the scarf over his chin to hide his beard, and put this veil on. It's a good job he ain't got a moustache."

The other complied, and then fell back a pace or two to gaze at his handiwork. "Strewth, though I ses it as shouldn't, you look a treat!" he remarked complacently. "Now, young-un, take 'old of his arm. Go up the back streets, and if you see anybody looking at you, call 'im 'Mar.'"

The two set off, after the man, who was a born realist, had tried to snatch a kiss from the skipper on the threshold. Fortunately for the success of the venture, it was pelting with rain, and, though a few people gazed curiously at the couple as they went hastily along, they were unmolested, and gained the wharf in safety, arriving just in time to see the schooner shoving off from the side.

At the sight the skipper held up his skirts and ran. "Ahoy!" he shouted. "Wait a minute."

The mate gave one look of blank astonishment at the extraordinary figure, and then turned away; but at that moment the stern came within jumping distance of the wharf, and uncle and nephew, moved with one impulse, leaped for it and gained the deck in safety.

"Why didn't you wait when I hailed you?" demanded the skipper fiercely.

"How was I to know it was you?" inquired the mate surlily, as he realised his defeat. "I thought it was the Empress of Rooshia."

The skipper stared at him dumbly.

"An' if you take my advice," said the mate, with a sneer, "you'll keep them things on. I never see you look so well in anything afore."

"I want to borrow some o' your clothes, Bob," said the skipper, eyeing him steadily.

"Where's your own?" asked the other.

"I don't know," said the skipper. "I was took with a fit last night, Bob, and when I woke up this morning they were gone. Somebody must have took advantage of my helpless state and taken 'em."

"Very likely," said the mate, turning away to shout an order to the crew, who were busy setting sail.

"Where are they, old man?" inquired the skipper.

"How should I know?" asked the other, becoming interested in the men again.

"I mean *your* clothes," said the skipper, who was fast losing his temper.

"Oh, mine?" said the mate. "Well, as a matter o' fact, I don't like lending my clothes. I'm rather pertickler. You might have a fit in *them*."

"You won't lend 'em to me?" asked the skipper.

"I won't," said the mate, speaking loudly, and frowning significantly at the crew, who were listening.

"Very good," said the skipper. "Ted, come here. Where's your other clothes?"

"I'm very sorry, sir," said Ted, shifting un-

easily from one leg to the other, and glancing at the mate for support; "but they ain't fit for the likes of you to wear, sir."

"I'm the best judge of that," said the skipper sharply. "Fetch 'em up."

"Well, to tell the truth, sir," said Ted, "I'm like the mate. I'm only a poor sailorman, but I wouldn't lend my clothes to the Queen of England."

"You fetch up them clothes," roared the skipper snatching off his bonnet and flinging it on the deck. "Fetch 'em up at once. D'ye think I'm going about in these petticoats?"

"They're my clothes," muttered Ted doggedly.

"Very well, then, I'll have Bill's," said the skipper. "But mind you, my lad, I'll make you pay for this afore I've done with you. Bill's the only honest man aboard this ship. Gimme your hand, Bill, old man."

"I'm with them two," said Bill gruffly, as he turned away.

The skipper, biting his lips with fury, turned from one to the other, and then, with a big oath, walked forward. Before he could reach the fo'c'sle Bill and Ted dived down before him, and, by the time he had descended, sat on their chests side by side confronting him. To threats and appeals alike they turned a deaf ear, and the frantic skipper was compelled at last to go on deck again, still encumbered with the hated skirts.

"Why don't you go an' lay down," said the mate, "an' I'll send you down a nice cup o' hot

tea. You'll get histericks, if you go on like that."

"I'll knock your 'ead off if you talk to me," said the skipper.

"Not you," said the mate cheerfully; "you ain't big enough. Look at that pore fellow over there."

The skipper looked in the direction indicated, and, swelling with impotent rage, shook his fist fiercely at a red-faced man with grey whiskers, who was wafting innumerable tender kisses from the bridge of a passing steamer.

"That's right," said the mate approvingly; "don't give 'im no encouragement. Love at first sight ain't worth having."

The skipper, suffering severely from suppressed emotion, went below, and the crew, after waiting a little while to make sure that he was not coming up again, made their way quietly to the mate.

"If we can only take him to Battlesea in this rig it'll be all right," said the latter. "You chaps stand by me. His slippers and sou'-wester is the only clothes he's got aboard. Chuck every needle you can lay your hands on overboard, or else he'll git trying to make a suit out of a piece of old sail or something. If we can only take him to Mr Pearson like this, it won't be so bad after all."

While these arrangements were in hand above, the skipper and the boy were busy over others below. Various startling schemes propounded by the skipper for obtaining possession of his men's attire were rejected by the youth as unlawful, and, what was worse, impracticable. For a couple of

hours they discussed ways and means, but only ended in diatribes against the mean ways of the crew; and the skipper, whose head ached still from his excesses, fell into a state of sullen despair at length, and sat silent.

"By Jove, Tommy, I've got it," he cried suddenly, starting up and hitting the table with his fist. "Where's your other suit?"

"That ain't no bigger than this one," said Tommy.

"You git it out," said the skipper with a knowing toss of his head. "Ah, there we are. Now go in my state-room and take those off."

The wondering Tommy, who thought that great grief had turned his kinsman's brain, complied, and emerged shortly afterwards in a blanket, bringing his clothes under his arm.

"Now, do you know what I'm going to do?" inquired the skipper, with a big smile.

"No."

"Fetch me the scissors, then. Now do you know what I'm going to do?"

"Cut up the two suits and make 'em into one," hazarded the horror-stricken Tommy. "Here, stop it! Leave off!"

The skipper pushed him impatiently off, and, placing the clothes on the table, took up the scissors, and, with a few slashing strokes, cut the garments into their component parts.

"What am *I* to wear?" said Tommy, beginning to blubber. "You didn't think of that."

"What are you to wear, you selfish young

pig?" said the skipper sternly. "Always thinking about yourself. Go and git some needles and thread, and if there's any left over, and you're a good boy, I'll see whether I can't make something for you out of the leavings."

"There ain't no needles here," whined Tommy, after a lengthened search.

"Go down the fo'c'sle and git the case of sail-makers' needles, then," said the skipper. "Don't let anyone see what you're after, an' some thread."

"Well, why couldn't you let me go in my clothes before you cut 'em up?" moaned Tommy. "I don't like going up in this blanket. They'll laugh at me."

"You go at once!" thundered the skipper, and, turning his back on him, whistled softly, and began to arrange the pieces of cloth.

"Laugh away, my lads," he said cheerfully, as an uproarious burst of laughter greeted the appearance of Tommy on deck. "Wait a bit."

He waited himself for nearly twenty minutes, at the end of which time Tommy, treading on his blanket, came flying down the companion-ladder, and rolled into the cabin.

"There ain't a needle aboard the ship," he said solemnly, as he picked himself up and rubbed his head. "I've looked everywhere."

"What?" roared the skipper, hastily concealing the pieces of cloth. "Here, Ted! Ted!"

"Ay, ay, sir!" said Ted, as he came below.

"I want a sail-maker's needle," said the skipper glibly. "I've got a rent in this skirt."

"I broke the last one yesterday," said Ted, with an evil grin.

"Any other needle, then," said the skipper, trying to conceal his emotion.

"I don't believe there's such a thing aboard the ship," said Ted, who had obeyed the mate's thoughtful injunction. "*Nor* thread. I was only saying so to the mate yesterday."

The skipper sank again to the lowest depths, waved him away, and then, getting on a corner of the locker, fell into a gloomy reverie.

"It's a pity you do things in such a hurry," said Tommy, sniffing vindictively. "You might have made sure of the needle before you spoiled my clothes. There's two of us going about ridiculous now."

The master of the *Sarah Jane* allowed this insolence to pass unheeded. It is in moments of deep distress that the mind of man, naturally reverting to solemn things, seeks to improve the occasion by a lecture. The skipper, chastened by suffering and disappointment, stuck his right hand in his pocket, after a lengthened search for it, and gently bidding the blanketed urchin in front of him to sit down, began:

"You see what comes of drink and cards," he said, mournfully. "Instead of being at the helm of my ship, racing all the other craft down the river, I'm skulkin' down below here like—like——"

"Like an actress," suggested Tommy.

The skipper eyed him all over. Tommy, unconscious of offence, met his gaze serenely.

"If," continued the skipper, "at any time you felt like taking too much, and you stopped with the beer-mug half-way to your lips, and thought of me sitting in this disgraceful state, what would you do?"

"I dunno," replied Tommy, yawning.

"What would you do?" persisted the skipper, with great expression.

"Laugh, I s'pose," said Tommy, after a moment's thought.

The sound of a well-boxed ear rang through the cabin.

"You're an unnatural, ungrateful little toad," said the skipper, fiercely. "You don't deserve to have a good, kind uncle to look after you."

"Anybody can have him for me," sobbed the indignant Tommy, as he tenderly felt his ear. "You look a precious sight more like an aunt than an uncle."

After firing this shot he vanished in a cloud of blanket, and the skipper, reluctantly abandoning a hastily-formed resolve of first flaying him alive and then flinging him overboard, sat down again and lit his pipe.

Once out of the river he came on deck again, and, ignoring by a great effort the smiles of the crew and the jibes of the mate, took command. The only alteration he made in his dress was to substitute his sou'-wester for the bonnet, and in this guise he did his work while the aggrieved Tommy hopped it in blankets. The three days at sea passed like a horrid dream. So covetous was

his gaze that the crew instinctively clutched their nether garments and looked to the buttoning of their coats as they passed him. He saw coats in the mainsail, and fashioned phantom trousers out of the flying jib, and towards the end began to babble of blue serges and mixed tweeds. Oblivious of fame, he had resolved to enter the harbour of Battlesea by night; but it was not to be. Near home the wind dropped, and the sun was well up before Battlesea came into view, a grey bank on the starboard bow.

Until within a mile of the harbour the skipper held on, and then his grasp on the wheel relaxed somewhat, and he looked round anxiously for the mate.

"Where's Bob?" he shouted.

"He's very ill, sir," said Ted, shaking his head.

"Ill?" gasped the startled skipper. "Here, take the wheel a minute."

He handed it over, and grasping his skirts, went hastily below. The mate was half lying, half sitting, in his bunk, groaning dismally.

"What's the matter?" inquired the skipper.

"I'm dying," said the mate. "I keep being tied up all in knots inside. I can't hold myself straight."

The other cleared his throat.

"You'd better take off your clothes and lay down a bit," he said kindly. "Let me help you off with them."

"No—don't—trouble," panted the mate.

"It ain't no trouble," said the skipper, in a trembling voice.

"No, I'll keep 'em on," said the mate, faintly. "I've always had an idea I'd like to die in my clothes. It may be foolish, but I can't help it."

"You'll have your wish some day, never fear, you infernal rascal," shouted the overwrought skipper. "You're shamming sickness to make me take the ship into port."

"Why shouldn't you take her in?" asked the mate, with an air of innocent surprise. "It's your duty as cap'n. You'd better get above now. The bar is always shifting."

The skipper, restraining himself by a mighty effort, went on deck again, and taking the wheel, addressed the crew. He spoke feelingly of the obedience men owed their superior officers, and the moral obligation they were under to lend them their trousers when they required them. He dwelt on the awful punishments awarded for mutiny, and proved clearly that to allow the master of a ship to enter port in petticoats was mutiny of the worst type. He then sent them below for their clothing. They were gone such a long time that it was palpable to the meanest intellect that they did not intend to bring it. Meantime the harbour widened out before him.

There were two or three people on the quay as the *Sarah Jane* came within hailing distance. By the time she had passed the lantern at the end of it there were two or three dozen, and the numbers were steadily increasing at the rate of three persons for every five yards she made. Kind-hearted, humane men, anxious that their friends should

not lose so great and cheap a treat, bribed small and reluctant boys with pennies to go in search of them, and by the time the schooner reached her berth a large proportion of the population of the port was looking over each other's shoulders and shouting foolish and hilarious inquiries to the skipper. The news reached the owner, and he came hurrying down to the ship just as the skipper, regardless of the heated remonstrances of the sightseers, was preparing to go below.

Mr Pearson was a stout man, and he came down exploding with wrath. Then he saw the apparition, and mirth overcame him. It became necessary for three stout fellows to act as buttresses, and the more indignant the skipper looked the harder their work became. Finally he was assisted, in a weak state, and laughing hysterically, to the deck of the schooner, where he followed the skipper below, and in a voice broken with emotion demanded an explanation.

"It's the finest sight I ever saw in my life, Bross," he said when the other had finished. "I wouldn't have missed it for anything. I've been feeling very low this last week, and it's done me good. Don't talk nonsense about leaving the ship. I wouldn't lose you for anything after this, but if you like to ship a fresh mate and crew you can please yourself. If you'll only come up to the house and let Mrs Pearson see you—she's been ailing—I'll give you a couple of pounds. Now, get your bonnet and come."

From "Many Cargoes"